

In 1979 I crossed the US on a 15-speed, state-of-the-art (at the time) Eisentraut upright touring bicycle. Having sold my car, it was the best such human powered traveling option I could find at the time. The load I carried ranged from 40 to 60 pounds contingent upon how much food and water I carried as well as any purchases I may have made along the way. For the load that I hauled from one coast to the other, I ran a set of rear panniers (the best Eclipse brand I could find) as well as a front handlebar bag.

I will NEVER tour in such a way ever again!!

The bike wasn't a bike but felt more like a Sherman tank. Holding down the front end, actually increased the size of my arms (I'm not complaining mind you but it does make a point). All of the handling characteristics that one can attribute to the joy of being on a lightweight two wheeler vanish the instant you start adding luggage to the bike itself. They just were not built for that!!

In fact, the first few times I rode without a load, after my tour, the bike was so responsive that it actually scared me. Over the years since that ride, many of the other TransAm cyclists who I have met have related the same experience to me. (Living here in Santa Cruz, on the Pacific Ocean, I get to meet those on two wheels out for the long haul on a somewhat frequent basis.)

When you choose the pannier option, there will still be things that you cannot fit inside of them. Most tents and sleeping bags, for example, just will not fit inside of even the biggest pack. This is inconvenient because it:

- Requires the use of bungee cords to strap them over the top openings of the panniers making those items inside of your bags less accessible.
- Requires that you will have to run your load higher and farther away from the hub making the bike less stable when you are moving.
- Makes these articles easier prey for theft (though I've never heard of this happening) making you feel less secure should you have to leave your bike behind for however long for whatever reason.
- Exposes them more to the elements should you hit inclement weather.
- Exposes them to ripping or tearing from crashes or sharp objects (in 1979 I tore a troublesome hole in my tent when I slid out on a rain soaked downhill in the Appalachians near the end of that TransAm).

With all the additional weight on your bike that panniers will require, your tires wear out a lot faster. If you think that healthy tread is only needed for those performance aspects of cycling such as cornering and speed that you as a cycle tourist are not concerned with, think again. Since worn tires make you far more susceptible to punctures, putting as much rubber between you and the road is important to keeping you on the bike and not fixing flats.

And should you flat, fixing one is a lot harder when panniers stand in the way. As will be any of the regular upkeep that will be required such as keeping your chain clean, brakes and derailleurs adjusted and wheels trued. Instead of just unhitching from a trailer (which on most commercial brands is a several second operation), with panniers, such repair requires that you unbungee and unhook your carefully arranged load as you then rummage around for those tools you will need. And since these items are heavier, you will have wanted to pack them as low and as close to the axle

as possible. Burying them in such a way, however, puts that many more steps before any work that can take place on the bike's rear anatomy.

Not only can a simple rear wheel flat become a huge project but broken spokes are also far more likely when you run panniers. It is for this reason that strengthening methods such as heavier gauge spokes, four-cross patterns, and 40 & 48 hole rims and hubs (the standard is 36) have come into existence. And unless you go through the trouble of bullet proofing your back wheel in such a way, you run the risk of having to go through the trauma of pulling your freewheel to replace a spoke somewhere on your ride. Since a large part of your TransAm will find you far away from tools too heavy to bring along, this becomes a concern. Especially if the cog is frozen in place and would benefit from the use of a vice.

It is harder to keep your bike looking fresh and ready for its daily job when you run panniers. Not only do they fade in the sun but they also get dirty. While this may not seem important to you at first blush, it is helpful to remember that you will be on center stage as you pass through those innumerable small towns that make up this America. And if you want a favorable reaction and the support of all these new people that will be vicariously sharing in your ride with you, you will want to make a good first impression.

And even those extra clothes you bring along will be hard to keep fresh and clean looking if you store them in panniers. When they live in such cramped quarters with your tools, extra tubes and camping supplies, not only will they begin to smell like the rest of your gear (the storage capacity in a trailer is generally greater meaning your things don't have to be so tightly packed together) but you can add the musty aroma that will result from the inevitable downpour you almost can't avoid on a long ride. Faced with having a hard enough time keeping yourself looking clean and crisp, when you then roll into town on a dirty bike, made to look even dirtier by oil stained and sun faded packs, people may more try to avoid you than to welcome you into their daily maneuverings. On both of my rides, what were once strangers brought me into their homes for dinners and lunches and gave me new t-shirts and hats, and even offered me rides (which I didn't accept of course). This was so because I didn't look like the nomad that I really was.

Not a one of them had any idea of my story before we met (as future Huckleberry Finns we can endear ourselves to those along the way with interesting stories either about ourselves or those tales from the TransAm road that we can't help but collect) and if I had looked (and/or smelled) like a homeless person, they surely wouldn't have wanted to know anything more. In keeping such doors from closing on me, I cleaned the bike, my helmet, my packs (at a laundromat) and on the second ride, my trailer, once a week. So just as on the road you will always want your person to look the best, so too do you want to keep your bike and all of its gear looking as good as it can.

Toward this end, if you still feel compelled to run panniers, at least take the effort (and trouble) to wash them every few weeks while on the ride at commercial laundromats. With panniers, rain can make your ride a nightmare. I will never forget the hapless cycle tourist I met in Nebraska in 1979. I rolled into Cody Park happy to see what looked like another overnight visitor camping in a town park. Brightly colored shirts, a tarp and sleeping bag were being aired out in the small trees that surrounded a bright

blue tent. No one, however, was anywhere to be found.

Sensing that I wouldn't have a problem spending the night here, though, I happily set up my tent close by. Then Steve came "home". After we excitedly introduced ourselves and talked about where our rides would take us, Steve told me why his campsite looked the way it did, "Man I got dumped on by the most hellacious rainstorm two days ago and I'm still trying to dry out."

"Two days ago?" I asked.

"Well yeah, I had two things working against me", Steve surmised as he stroked his beard. Looking at his makeshift clothes lines, he continued, "First the damn storm got my panniers wet when I was riding and that got everything inside of them wet and then the rain fly on my tent didn't hold the water that dumped down here last night. Man you wouldn't have believed that storm. I pretty much had everything dry like it is now," he said as we looked around at the gear that the sun had once again dried, "and then I heard thunder and then the rain started in again and then my tent started leaking."

"So couldn't you at least run out and save all your stuff from getting wet again?" I asked.

"And put it where? The floor of my tent was like a little river and I never would have had the time to get all my stuff into the panniers. I just had to gut it out."

We both shook our heads laughing at the helpless situation Steve had found himself in. That was 1979. Hauling our gear in a trailer just was something neither of us had even considered back then. They were not promoted as an option nor, did we know of any that were even commercially available.

Steve's entire situation would have been completely different had he run a trailer. He also could have water proofed his panniers but you never know how good of a job you did until a storm hits. In the first place, with the exception of the BOB or [Kool Stop Kool Mule](#) (which give you a place to mount your panniers while the BOB also offers a giant duffel bag for storage as an option), most trailers feature a waterproof top covering so his gear wouldn't have gotten soaked while he was pedaling. And then when the skies exploded later that evening, he could have quickly gathered up all his dry things and just threw them inside the trailer, covered it and worried about organizing his load the following morning when the storm ended.

Here in 2003, Steve could have just spent a little bit more money before he hit the road and bought waterproof panniers but the plight he endured does make a point. One must always expend more of his or her precious riding time reloading an emptied set of panniers. With a trailer, you can be a lot less careful about how you configure your load.

Parking your bike is always a problem when you run panniers. Anything you lean it against has to first be load tested to make sure it will hold your bike up. Or in some cases, such as store windows, to keep them from breaking. Thirty to fifty pounds on any bike turns one into a whole different animal once it is stopped. Because the front wheel wants to turn when the bike is leaned against anything, causing it to topple, there are even devices made that lock the wheel in place. Nor will a kickstand support all this weight.

None of the above concerns exist when you do a trailer. While the convenience of a kickstand is something you and your bike cannot enjoy on a pannier laden two

wheeler, two trailers, the BOB and the BicycleR Evolution, even go as far as to double as a kickstands when you jackknife the bike against them. With any brand of trailer you choose your bike will always be able to enjoy the dignity and functionality of a kickstand.

Before you laugh kickstands off to low tech department store bikes, consider this. A kickstand on a touring bike gives you an added element of freedom. There will be times, should you choose the pannier option, when you can't just lay your bike on its side if there is nothing nearby to lean it against. And instead of biking the extra 50 feet to the nearest mile marker or barbed wire fence post when you are in a prairie, for example, you can stop anywhere if your pannier-free bike is outfitted with a kickstand. I remember one time, for example, when leaving Yellowstone National Park, a pack of giant moose appeared near a creek adjacent to the road. By the time I found something strong enough to lean my bike against so I could photograph them, however, enough cars had stopped and taken pictures of these beautiful creatures for them to be scared from my view. This would not have happened if I had had a kickstand. In fact, there were a lot of pictures I didn't take because a satisfactory leaning post was not located nearby.

And even the best leaning post still won't let you go off and explore a new area like you would really want to explore it. On your bike. Free of Gear. Nor are quick gear free errands practical when you run panniers.

Suppose for example that you have set up camp (there were also a lot of places I didn't even consider for camping because there was no where to lean my bike when I ran panniers) for the evening and you want to bike into a nearby town to get a newspaper, an ice cream or something special to eat. With panniers this is not even a consideration because you know that your pannier laden tank is just too cumbersome for such a quick spin or no match for any kind of traffic, lights or tight roads that could result. Nor will you want to expend the time or the energy to download and then upload your gear carrying bike. With a trailer you can just unhitch in seconds and head off for a joy ride on the lightweight bike you knew before your tour.

At the campsite itself, your trailer can serve many uses. One, the BicycleR Evolution, has a hard plastic lid which lets it serve as a picnic table upon which breakfast can be had, a game of cards can be played or tools can be rested. With a small amount of jury rigging, such counter space can also be made available with most of the other two wheel trailers (the BOB, Kool Stop Wilderbeast and Kool Stop Kool Mule are one wheelers) that are on the market. A small load of firewood can be rounded up with an emptied trailer while a still full trailer can serve as a clothes closet which you can locate right next to your tent. In such a way, you can have your belongings a lot closer to you, immediately adjacent to your tent door, when you sleep at night and then awaken in the brisk air of the following morning.

This is important because it lets you access everything you have along for the ride without having to climb out of the comfort of your tent. Once you climb inside, you can stay inside. Should you forget a flashlight, want to write in your journal or munch on something you didn't bring in with you, for example, you don't have to go outside to get it. With panniers, however, such convenience is not possible since you cannot lean your bike against the entrance (or any part of the tent for that matter) of your mobile

home without blocking your way or collapsing your shelter.

You don't have to be superman to be able to pull a trailer. If anything I always felt like some ancient gladiator athlete climbing aboard a Trojan Horse when I ran panniers. The bike felt enormous and my balance skills were continuously challenged -- all the micro adjustments required of my arms only added to the demand my saddle bag laden bicycle was placing on me.

As on a pannier laden two wheeler, just getting the machine started is also the hardest part when you tow a trailer. And once you do overcome inertia with either option, the pedaling becomes easy again. With a trailer, unless it is an older one that makes noise while in transit, more often than not, you'll even forget it's back there. Until you hit a hill. And yet, any ascent, when carrying a load, whether it is on the bike or behind it, will slow you down. How slow will only depend on the amount of weight, not how it's transported.

The only skill you will have to learn with trailers is how to back up your bike when it is attached to one. And even this is an easy feat to master. If you just lift the front wheel of your bike off the ground as you reverse your direction, your gear carrying conveyance will go anywhere your direct it.

Some people worry that the shoulder upon which they are forced to ride is not wide enough for a trailer. With a one wheel trailer, this is not a problem and yet I found on my ride across the US in '86 with a two-wheel trailer, that motorists seemed to give me a wider berth whenever they passed me. Not only did the slightly wider profile that I offered make me more visible, but car drivers seemed to associate my trailer with work and respected me as someone paying my way through their lands -- I wasn't seen by them as just another tourist cluttering up their roadways.

With the many different trailers on the marketplace now, all of them have advantages and disadvantages when compared to one another. The ones that we feel are the best in each of the niches they serve are compared in the table at:

<http://www.bikeroute.com/TrailerMatrix.htm>

For lightweight touring the one wheel trailers excel but their limits become obvious when you try to make them a part of your life at home. For example, hauling a bike around (especially a recumbent) on them is very hard if not impossible. Nor will you feel comfortable with heavy objects such as a beer keg or five gallons of drinking water (I regularly haul four such containers in my Blue Sky).

While it would also be difficult to transport an extra bicycle on the lightweight trailers that have two wheels, the BicycleR Evolution and the Bykaboose , it is still possible to safely exceed the recommended carrying capacity for other objects you may find yourself needing to carry. (If you try to do so on the one wheelers, the bike itself will end up all over the roadway.) For example, once in a while you may want to press your trailer into service as a bike taxi to carry a real person around. Most two wheel trailers, though not recommended for insurance reasons, can be called upon to do such a job. Suppose also, for example, that you locate an oversize, overweight item such as an outdoor table and umbrella at a garage sale and you then need to get it home. With a little creativity, this is not a problem for a two wheeled trailer.

Being able to transport awkwardly sized objects is an important consideration if you are moving toward a more car-free lifestyle because the bike trailer is an integral part

of living in such way. In this way of doing your life, even something as simple as whether or not you can haul a bike in your cart becomes an important consideration. Should your bike break down in a way that requires you haul your broken machine to the bike shop for repair, for example, you can still do so with the back bike up bike you will already have on hand for such a lifestyle (see "[How to Enjoy a More Car Free Lifestyle](#)": ). And yet there again, if your resources allow it, you might even want to own one trailer for touring and one for cargo.